

Bermudagrass — “Old Faithful”

Don't assume that other grasses are better.

BY BUD WHITE

Controversy has arisen over the last few years concerning the performance of hybrid bermudagrasses in the southern states. The recent turf-grass craze has been to use zoysiagrass or paspalum on tees and fairways instead of bermudagrass. Although much of this desire is driven by the novelty of change — the “WOW!” factor — bermudagrass still has plenty of advantages.

The hybrid bermudagrasses, predominantly Tifway (419), have been tremendous performers for many years in the southern United States. Improvements made to Tifway, such as the development of the hybrid TifSport, patented in 1997, add an even greater degree of playability and quality of surface to tees and fairways. Not only do the hybrid bermudagrasses have a great history of performance, but consider their other attributes as well:

1. Great playing quality.
2. Ease of weed control.
3. Extremely low disease/insect susceptibility.
4. Exceptional mowing quality.
5. Strong recuperative ability.
6. Reasonable installation cost.
7. Excellent winter hardiness when properly managed.

Bermudagrass has been well adapted to all southern markets in the U.S. It has performed well on sandier-based soils and also on heavier clay soils. At times, bermudagrass performance on clay soils has been unreasonably questioned, but there is no doubt its performance on an array of soils across the southern states has been exceptional. Using bermudagrass in the fairways and roughs also allows for an easy change of mowing patterns and/or the addition of an intermediate rough. This is more

difficult when other grasses are utilized because often the fairway and the rough grasses are different species or varieties, i.e., zoysiagrass fairways and bermudagrass roughs, or two different varieties of zoysia in fairways and roughs.

The lower maintenance cost of bermudagrasses can be a critical factor when determining species selection. Very seldom, if ever, does bermudagrass require a fungicide application on tees and fairways. On the other hand, zoysiagrass and paspalum grasses need routine fungicide applications for preventative disease control. This adds a significant cost to the maintenance budget and is a factor courses must carefully consider as they weigh the cost of change. Applying fungicide to large acreages might also be an environmental concern.

Is water quality an issue? Bermudagrasses are not as tolerant of poor water quality as paspalum, but they are rated more salt tolerant than the zoysiagrasses. Additionally, bermudagrasses have very good tolerance of moderate salt levels in irrigation water when coring, soil amendments, and leaching are carried out properly.

Some in the turf industry have claimed that zoysiagrass and paspalum provide a superior surface. These turfs are not necessarily superior, but they do offer a unique aspect. In many circumstances, the newer grasses can add an enhancing factor to the marketing and appearance of a golf course. The beautiful striping of paspalums or fine-leaved zoysiagrasses is incredible.

Under circumstances such as resort play, overseeding is considered a necessity. Hybrid bermudagrasses have much better tolerance to overseeding and

provide a better spring transition from cool-season overseeded grasses than zoysias or paspalums. Spring transition can have devastating consequences to zoysiagrass, as the zoysias have difficulty recovering in the spring when overseeded. If overseeding is important, turf selection must be carefully weighed.

Installation costs are a major consideration for these newer grasses. Zoysiagrasses and paspalums are almost always solid-sodded on tees, fairways, slopes, and, in many cases, roughs, versus the much less expensive sprigging of bermudagrass. It is not uncommon for golf courses today to have a \$1-million-plus sod budget when some of the newer grasses are used. The growing trend of “sand-capping” entire fairways for zoysia sod installation is another significant cost. The newer seeded bermudagrasses also offer tremendous playing quality, and they are an excellent choice in circumstances where golf courses are trying to reduce establishment costs as much as possible.

Zoysiagrass and paspalum are truly remarkable turfgrasses in the proper environment. They add a very different look and texture to the aesthetics of the golf course, and they provide a different playing surface that many golfers prefer over bermudagrass. However, don't forget the long track record of hybrid bermudagrass, its great performance, its economical value, and its dependability over many years. Before jumping onto the “WOW!” bandwagon, evaluate which turfgrass best suits the needs and budget of your golf course. Change is not always better.

BUD WHITE is a senior agronomist in the Green Section's Mid-Continent Region.